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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 000112

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SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE FIELD: VALLEDUPAR AND CESAR

DEPARTMENT

REF: BOGOTA 00097

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Politics and economics in the northern department of Cesar are heavily influenced by the interests of a small number of prominent families and the depredations of illegal armed groups. Despite the distractions posed by feuds within the local aristocracy and the active presence of the FARC, ELN, and AUC, the GOC has improved the security situation in the department significantly since President Alvaro Uribe took office in August 2002. All of the department's municipalities now have a permanent police presence, and kidnappings on departmental highways -- which severely discouraged travel and commerce -- have been dramatically reduced. The porous border with Venezuela, however, continues to be a security problem, and the local economy has yet to recover from the downturn of the late 1990s. End Summary.

Background

12. (U) On December 11-13, Embassy officials visited Valledupar, capital of the northern department of Cesar. Situated near the southern foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains and 35 miles west of the rugged Venezuelan border, Valledupar is the department's largest city, with approximately 400,000 inhabitants. The department's principal industries are coal mining, cotton farming, and cattle ranching, although the internal armed conflict has adversely affected all these industries. According to the Social Solidarity Network (RSS), the GOC's displaced persons service agency, during 2000-2002, more persons were forcibly displaced in Cesar than in any other department. In 2003, 11 percent of all kidnappings in Colombia took place in Cesar. Approximately 6,000 military and 2,000 police are stationed in the department.

Family Ties

13. (C) Cesar is dominated by a handful of powerful families, among them the Araujos, Gneccos, Castros, and Puppos. Not only are they major power brokers in Cesar, but they also wield significant influence in Bogota. According to Lieutenant Colonel Hernan Mejia (protect), commander of the Colombian Army's Second Artillery Battalion, the Araujos and Gneccos have each reached accommodations with different illegal armed groups) the Araujos with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and the Gneccos with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

14. (C) The Araujo family has produced ten departmental governors, including current Governor Hernando Molina Araujo. Molina's mother, the late Consuelo Araujo Noguera, affectionately known throughout Colombia as "La Cacica," was GOC Minister of Culture when she was kidnapped and murdered by the FARC in September 2001. His cousin Maria Consuelo Araujo is the current Minister of Culture.

15. (C) The Gnecco family has a member serving on the Supreme Court. One family member was removed from the governorship for corruption. Additional family members have held mayoral and other local government posts in surrounding departments. Family icon Hugo Gnecco was accused of fiscal improprieties as mayor of Santa Marta, Magdalena department, and was suspended in February 2003. The public accusations were made by Inspector General Maya, of the Araujo family, which raised suspicions that the charges were politically motivated.

The Influence of Illegal Armed Groups

16. (C) The tenor of local and departmental politics is strongly influenced by illegal armed groups.
-- The FARC kidnapped Elias Guillermo Ochoa in 1998, in

between his two stints as mayor. Ochoa's second term concluded in December 2003. Of seven brothers in his immediate family, four have been kidnapped by an illegal armed group. One brother was kidnapped twice.

-- Recently inaugurated Governor Hernando Molina ran uncontested in the October departmental election. Other viable candidates dropped out of the race, reportedly under pressure by the AUC. Nearly half of the votes were blank ballots, in protest.

-- New Valledupar mayor, Ciro Arturo Pupo, is a cousin of prominent AUC paramilitary leader Rodrigo Tovar Pupo. Tovar operates near the town of Becerril, 50 miles south of Valledupar. He reports directly to AUC military commander Salvatore Mancuso. Mayor Pupo (strictly protect) told poloffs that although he and his cousin are not on good terms, their family ties guarantee him "unsolicited" protection. Other sources confirmed strained relations between Ciro Pupo and Rodrigo Tovar.

17. (C) Colombia's three principal illegal armed groups -- the FARC, the AUC, and the National Liberation Army (ELN) -- have a strong presence in Cesar department. FARC fronts operate along the Venezuelan border and in parts of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains. The ELN is also present in the Sierra Nevadas, as evidenced by its kidnapping of eight foreign tourists on the range's north slope in September (reftel). The AUC is the primary terrorist organization operating on the department's central and southern plains, where cattle ranching and coal mining are the principal economic engines. Most government officials poloffs spoke with said the paramilitaries now pose the greatest threat to the department.

18. (C) According to local officials, Cesar does not have a significant drug trafficking economy. Consequently, locally based illegal armed groups are relatively poor and rely heavily on kidnapping and extortion for resources. Because there are few coca and poppy fields to protect, illegal armed groups lay fewer improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Cesar than they do in other departments.

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The Porous Venezuelan Border: A Security Threat
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19. (C) Military and police officials expressed concern about the FARC's exploitation of the mountainous Venezuelan border and its alleged use of permanent encampments in Venezuela. Former governor Guillermo Castro, who left office in December 2003, asserted that Venezuelan officials visit these FARC camps on a regular basis. Local representatives of the Administrative Department of Security (DAS), Colombia's FBI/INS-equivalent, described their cooperation with their Venezuelan counterparts as limited, but generally positive.

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Security Improving, but the Economy Lags Behind
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110. (C) Before the election of President Alvaro Uribe, high numbers of kidnappings, murders, and extortion attempts discouraged residents from using the department's highways and led many to abandon their farms and country homes for the relative safety of the cities. According to local politicians and law enforcement officials, however, security in the department has improved dramatically over the past year, encouraging intercity travel and the return of property owners to rural areas.

111. (C) All municipalities in Cesar now have a police force, and three 150-man "Carabinero", or rural mounted police, squadrons operate in the department. Additional police have been assigned exclusively to patrolling the principal highway linking Valledupar with Santa Marta, on the Caribbean coast. Kidnappings along the highway have decreased significantly over the past year, a result of a larger police presence and better coordination between the police and the military.

112. (SBU) Cesar's economy has suffered from the department's previously tenuous security situation. Valledupar's mayor estimated unemployment in the city to be about forty percent, which is inflated by large numbers of displaced persons. With security improving, local officials expressed optimism about the economy, beginning with a revitalization of the cotton industry.

WOOD